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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 004224

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/PMBS, INR/EAP, USIP - SOLOMON

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SUBJECT: INCOMING ARMM GOVERNOR EAGER FOR CONTINUED US ASSISTANCE

REF: MANILA 3726

Classified By: Political Officer Joseph Saus  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary. Autonomous Region In Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) Governor-elect Zaldy Ampatuan has promised to embrace a transparent and consultative leadership platform that would focus on the Mindanao peace process, local education needs, health care, and agriculture. Mission will work to establish a good working relationship with Ampatuan, who expressed eagerness to continue US assistance programs and who agreed to an in-depth briefing by USAID upon assuming office on September 30. However, there is concern in some circles that Ampatuan may simply serve as a proxy for his powerful political boss father, and not govern the ARMM effectively. End Summary.

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Zaldy And Friends Meet The Mission  
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2. (C) Charge, A/DCM, USAID Director, and poloff met with ARMM Governor-elect Zaldy Ampatuan, at his request, on August 31. Accompanying him were Zamzamin Ampatuan (Convenor of the National Anti-Poverty Commission), Shamron Ampatuan (Mayor of Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao Province), and Bassit Accoy (incoming ARMM Technical Advisor). (Note: Zamzamin and Shamron are Zaldy's second cousin and nephew, respectively. Zamzamin is a close Embassy contact, well known for his articulate and moderate views of Islam, who had previously served as Executive Director of the Presidential Office of Muslim Affairs. End Note.)

3. (SBU) Ampatuan identified his top priorities for the ARMM as: the peace process; education for his constituents; health care; and agriculture. He pledged that his leadership will be transparent and in close consultation with ARMM constituents.

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Peace Process And Education  
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4. (SBU) Zamzamin (not Zaldy) did most of the talking when it came to specifics. It is important to remain "realistic" regarding the peace process and closely to review all provisions, according to Zamzamin. Zaldy noted that improved education, health, and agriculture could result from a lasting peace agreement in the region. Regarding education, Zamzamin explained the long-term financial problems of the ARMM's Department of Education have prompted local teachers to work without some pay and benefits for several years. Zaldy promised to address these problems by improving the economy and countering Muslim extremism through better education. Zamzamin added the ARMM lacks the funding, resources, and training capacity to incorporate a nationally mandated secular/Islamic curriculum.

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Agriculture And Industry  
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5. (SBU) Zaldy noted there is plenty of idle land available for agriculture and stressed that fisheries are also important for the coastal regions and island provinces of the ARMM. To attract investment, Zamzamin cited a tax incentive that facilitates the importation of farm machinery. Zamzamin also cited Malaysian and Chinese interest in developing strategic minerals and possible petroleum deposits in the Liguan Marsh and the Sulu Sea.

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Health Care  
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6. (SBU) According to Zamzamin, 80-percent of ARMM's budget goes to "personnel," and what is left cannot support the ARMM's programs, including health care. As a result, the ARMM needs to find additional sources, including from international donors. Charge and USAID Director highlighted the US-funded network of midwife clinics, which Zamzamin agreed were an important contribution.

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Peace and Stability  
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17. (SBU) The Ampatuans noted that several family members, including Zaldy's brother, have died in bombings or ambushes resulting from clan rivalry-related violence. Zamzamin stressed that local roads could help security forces move against suspected terrorists or criminals. He requested a continuation of the "Arms to Farms" Livelihood Enhancement Assistance program for ex-combatant rebels.

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Mission Looks To Continued Partnership  
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18. (SBU) Charge and other Mission officials pledged to continue close cooperation with the ARMM and described a variety of ongoing programs, mostly funded by USAID. We offered to provide an in-depth briefing by USAID officials, which Zaldy asked to defer until he takes office on September 30. He said that he planned to invite Charge and other USG officials to the ceremony. He expressed eagerness to work with USAID.

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Comment  
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19. (C) Many in Mindanao and Manila have expressed concern over the 37-year old Zaldy's poor personal reputation and belief that he will merely act as a proxy for his father, the Ampatuan patriarch and political boss, especially in Maguindanao. Others fear that he will concentrate on Maguindanao to the detriment of other areas in the ARMM. The ARMM faces serious economic and developmental problems; Zaldy will need much more than good fortune and family influence to get the region on track. Mission will seek to work productively with Zaldy, as with his predecessor, in order to continue our outstanding programs that have already contributed so much to the expansion of peace and development in the Philippines' poorest region.

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